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ABSTRACT

When covering persuasion in the basic speech communication course, many textbooks include information on how students can detect logical fallacies in the persuasive attempts of others. It is important to provide students with a hands-on experience that will help them apply their knowledge of logical fallacies so that they can retain and better use this information. Attempts to persuade others occur consistently in the mass media. For example, in the editorial sections of newspapers, readers are not only writing to voice their opinions but also so that others may be persuaded to agree as well. Often the positions are argued illogically in the letters-to-the-editor but appear convincing to unaware readers because the writers display sincerity and passion in their writing. Letters-to-the-editor and editorials have been used successfully in analytic writing activities. This paper outlines two letters-to-the-editor activities an instructor can use to increase students' awareness of the use of logical fallacies. The paper first describes an in-class analysis activity which would follow the students' introduction to persuasive strategies, in which the instructor provides them with letters that contain logical fallacies. It then suggests a more difficult take-home exam or out-of-class assignment in which students can be asked to hunt down their own letters for analysis. (NKA)

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Using letters-to-the-editor to uncover logical fallacies

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Introduction

The topic of persuasion is frequently covered in the basic Speech Communication course. Beyond providing students with strategies they can use to persuade, many textbooks also include information on how students can detect logical fallacies in the persuasive attempts of others. Covering these fallacies in course lecture is helpful, but merely exposing students to the terms and definitions does not guarantee students will be able to detect these fallacies once outside of the classroom. Therefore, it is important to provide students with a hands-on experience that will help them apply their knowledge of logical fallacies so that they can retain and better use this information. Real-world applications address the highest levels of the cognitive domain, where knowledge is concerned with the ability to interpret, analyze and synthesize the knowledge acquired at lower levels (McCroskey, 1992).

Attempts to persuade others occur consistently in the mass media. For example, in the editorial section of a newspaper readers are not only writing so that their opinion can be voiced, but also so that others may be persuaded to agree as well. Often the positions are argued illogically in letters-to-the-editor, but the letters appear convincing to unaware readers because the writers display sincerity and passion in their writing.

By exposing students to these letters and asking them to conduct an analysis, students will have a richer understanding of

how logical fallacies can be lurking beneath the surface of seemingly fluent real-life arguments. Letters-to-the-editor and editorials have been used successfully in analytic writing activities (Forrest, 1993; LaMascus, 1995; Madden, 1985; Middendorf, 1992; and Morello, 1991). They also lend themselves well to the basic communication course. This paper will outline two letters-to-the-editor activities an instructor can use to increase students' awareness of the use of logical fallacies.

In-Class Analysis

In order to conduct a meaningful discussion on logical fallacies, the instructor should first have students read the relevant persuasion chapter in their course text. If the course text discusses persuasion, but not fallacies of argument, the instructor can provide a one-page supplemental sheet with the names of fallacies and examples of each.

An in-class lecture and/or discussion of logical fallacies would follow the students' introduction to persuasive strategies. For example, some of the logical fallacies covered in the Osborn and Osborn (1991) text include the slippery slope fallacy (assumes that once something happens it establishes an inevitable trend leading to disastrous results), red herring (irrelevant material is introduced to divert attention), incomparable percentages, and argument ad hominem (attack not on the issues but on the people who advance them).

Following an explanation of the terms with examples, the instructor may read several manufactured statements that include

fairly obvious use of these fallacies. Students can then test their recall and understanding by identifying the specific fallacy used in the instructor's statement.

It is important to take students beyond this basic level of recognition, however. The basic course should not only prepare students to become better producers of information, it should also prepare students to become better "consumers" of information. Therefore it is necessary to provide the class with real-world examples of poorly constructed arguments. Equipping students with critical thinking skills will assist in preparing students for intellectual tasks they will face in their future. As Greg and Renz (1993) point out, the understanding and skills retaining relevance are those which will enable individuals to sort through the plethora of information and ideas which will increase, not decrease, in importance.

Bringing the editorial section of a newspaper into the classroom is an excellent tool to introduce students to "persuasion in action." Textbook examples are often very "clean" and well-tailored for the purposes they serve. The editorial page, in particular the letters-to-the-editor section, provides a much less tidy version of persuasive arguments -- the type students are most likely to come across in their daily lives.

Prior to teaching the persuasive unit, the instructor needs to peruse the editorial sections of newspapers and clip out letters-to-the-editor that contain fallacies of logic. Ideally a letter for each student in class should be collected. However, if

a smaller number of letters are available, students can work in pairs or groups.

Following the lecture and discussion mentioned earlier, the instructor passes out the letters to the students and asks them to find any logical fallacies in the arguments presented. After students have had time to analyze their letters, they are asked to briefly describe their letter to the rest of the class, highlighting the logical fallacy they found. They should also explain how the fallacy could mislead the average newspaper reader.

The real challenge in this exercise is helping students spot the fallacies since the fallacies are not as easy to detect in the letters as they are in the textbook material. For example, the following excerpt from a recent letter to the "Detroit Free Press" provides an instance of argument ad hominem:

> "Op-ed columnist Thomas Friedman's comparison of freshman Republicans' desired spending restraints and downsizing of the bloated federal government to the lack of democratic government or civilized society in various countries in Africa shows that he is **intellectually bankrupt**..."

Depending on the level of the students and the types of letters available, the instructor may need to be flexible in discussing fallacies. Since real-world mistakes in argumentation do not always fit neatly under the fallacies outlined in a particular text in a basic course, students can also be rewarded for even pointing out a flawed argument without having to attach

a category name to the flaw. The key is for students to see that letters, that often at first glance appear to make sense, under closer scrutiny do not follow logical persuasive designs. This in turn should provide students for a better basis to detect future occurrences of logical fallacies in the media.

Take-home exam

An alternative to the in-class discussion of letters-to-the-editor can move the difficulty level of the material up a notch. Instead of the instructor providing students with letters that contain logical fallacies, the students can be asked to hunt down their own letters as part of a take-home exam or out-of-class assignment.

For the assignment, students should look through newspapers and magazines and find their own example of a logical fallacy "in action." The student then clips out the letter or article and staples it to a written explanation of the fallacy and why the fallacy could mislead people reading the material. The instructor can photocopy these student examples for use in future classrooms, thus building up a file of real-life illustrations.

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